Pennsylvania Railroad: Harrisburg Station and Trainshed
Market and South Fourth Streets
Harrisburg
Dauphin County
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-85

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior
P. O. Box 37127
Washington, D. C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Pennsylvania Railroad: Harrisburg Station and Trainshed

HAER No. PA-85

Location: Market and South Fourth Streets
Harrisburg, Dauphin County, Pennsylvania

UTM: 18.340320.445832
Quad: Harrisburg West, PA

Date of Construction: 1887

Builder: Pennsylvania Railroad

Present Owner: Penn Central Transportation Company
30th and Market Streets
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Significance: When this train station was constructed, Harrisburg was a major railroad center, located at the foot of the Allegheny Mountains. The train sheds are particularly significant. When constructed, they were among the largest train sheds of the period and, presently, they are among the few train sheds in existence. The Fink roof truss is perhaps even more rare, particularly with the use of wooden members in conjunction with steel.

Transmitted by: Jean P. Yearby, HAER, 1987

The Penn Central Railroad Station is the third station built by the Pennsylvania Railroad at its present location in Harrisburg. The original station was built in 1837, the second station in 1857, and the present station during the years 1885-1887. During this period, Harrisburg had become a major railroad center, located at the foot of the Allegheny Mountains. The Pennsylvania Railroad undertook numerous construction projects to improve passenger and freight service and the passenger station and sheds are the most important of the few structures remaining from the years when Harrisburg was a major stop along the Main Line.

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The prototype of this form was designed by engineer Albert Fink of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and patented in 1854. Fink later became chief engineer and vice-president of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad and is known as the father of railway economics. Fink was one of those most responsible for the introduction of iron bridges on American railroads. The Fink truss formed the basis for long-span bridges over western rivers, and the Fink trusses of the Harrisburg trainshed are testimony to the soundness of his design. The design endured for over seventy years in a field where new forms were patented almost weekly. The use of this form at Harrisburg shows that it was equally suitable after steel had replaced iron and riveted connections had superseded pinned panel joints in American engineering practice. The Harrisburg trainshed is the earliest major example of a form whose importance to American industrial building can hardly be exaggerated.

The original Penn Central Railroad Station was two and one-half stories in height with a gable roof and measured approximately 166 feet in length and 60 feet in width. The exterior walls of the original section are constructed of brick with a plaster interior surface. A course of terra cotta roping runs above the first floor porch roof. Between the first and second floors runs a belt course of terra cotta egg and dart moulding, below which are several courses of corbelled brick dentils. The walls below grade are concrete.

The first floor interior is composed of steel beams and concrete supported by brick arches between steel purlins. The second floor structure is comprised of wood joists and flooring on steel beams supported by steel columns. The roof is composed of wood trusses with wood sheathing and slate roofing. The first floor interior originally contained a "gentlemen's waiting room," a "ladies' waiting room" a restaurant, and a ticket office; the second floor contained offices, while the area above was used as storage space.

The first major alteration occurred in 1902 with the addition of a three bay, two-story baggage room to the south end, approximately 60 feet in length. A new passenger tunnel between the station and shed was also constructed along with overhead passenger bridges. In 1904, the station was severely damaged by fire and was completely remodeled. The attic space was turned into a third story with the addition of 13 rooms for office space under a gambrel roof with eight pedimented dormers on each side.

In 1911, a two-story, three-bay extension, approximately 60 feet in length, was added to the north end. The interior of the waiting room and restaurant were also rearranged. Minor alterations also occurred in 1910 with the addition of a back lobby and, in 1912, with the construction of a drugstore and barber shop to the rear, along with a tubercular waiting room. In 1936, the passenger and baggage bridge was raised one and one-half feet for electrification of the trains. By 1937, a second, two-story, three-bay extension was added to the south end, also approximately 60 feet long. The last major construction project was in 1949 with the remodeling of the basement into employee facilities.

Two train sheds are located to the rear of the passenger station. The shed nearest the station was built in 1885 when construction of the station began. Originally 420 feet in length by 90 feet in width, the shed was extended by 120 feet in 1911, making its total length approximately 540 feet. The far shed was built sometime after 1896.

Both train sheds are constructed of structural steel columns with timber and steel trusses spaced 20 feet apart. The built-up steel members are riveted together and joined with a wooden top chord. A clerestory stands above a composition roof, parts of which have been removed as the result of damage caused by weathering.

The trusses of the sheds are particularly significant. Known as Fink trusses, after the use of the same principle in the bridge truss of Albert Fink, the truss is derived from an inverted kings-post truss by introducing secondary kings-post trusses within the primary one.

Sources

Berman, David M. National Register Nomination, January 1975.

Zembala, Dennis M. National Landmark Nomination, National Landmark Files, National Park Service, Washington, D. C.